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In 'The Blue Suit,' confusion and distrust reign

THE BLUE SUIT: A Memoir of Crime
By Richard Rayner
Houghton Mifflin
216 pages, $19.95

By MICHAEL D. LANGAN
News Book Reviewer

This is a dishonorable updating of an honorable literary form, the picaresque novel. The genre is at least 400 years old and probably Spanish in origin. "Don Quixote" is a good example of it. "The Blue Suit" is not.

The intent of a picaresque novel is to chronicle a series of roguish incidents not necessarily bound together with a strong plot line. On the face of it, this sounds like something that most of us without much talent might do.

"The Blue Suit" is written in this style by a bright fellow and self-proclaimed reformed rogue, Richard Rayner, graduate of Cambridge in philosophy. Rayner feels pretty good about himself because, after 30 years or so out of college, he claims that he was a jerk — and now he's not.

Rayner supported himself while in school and after by stealing books and forging checks to make his way. And, pride be damned, he figures he has writing talent and he'd like to make some money by writing his humorous, if no-account adventures. I'm not so sure he has reformed. There's not much evidence to think that this very light entertainment isn't just his latest passel of lies.

The blue suit, by the way, refers to what he calls "my only suit, bought for me by my mother from Freeman's, a mail-order club. The suit wasn't made from cotton, or wool, or any of the potentially excellent synthetic fabrics, but some material that seemed actually to have been woven together out of cardboard. . . . It felt about the body like armor." The suit might also serve as a pseudonym for the English police, who must have some interest in Mr. Rayner returning from his Los Angeles home to answer a few questions.

Rayner tells us along the way that his father was a con man and his mother wielded a knife and a bottle of gin on occasion. He doesn't do this in any explanation of his behavior, merely to flesh out his stories of conniving and duplicity.

There are a couple of good stories here. Pinching "The Sermons of John Donne" is one. Carrying around the Christmas Day sermon of 1621, "If thou canst take this light of reason that is in thee, this poor snuffe, . . . that faint or dimme knowledge of God that riseth out of the light of nature . . ." is appropriately paradoxical.

Equally laughsious is the explanation of philosopher A.J. Ayer's book "Language, Truth and Logic," whose thesis, according to Rayner, is that "there were no such properties as 'good' and 'evil,' merely 'boo' and 'hurrah.' Morality did not exist, only changeable codes of social acceptability. Hence: Hitler-boo! Gandhi-hurrah!"

There is a difference, however, between a revel, revelle and revelation. The first is fun, the second is a warning, and the third a disclosure revealing the truth. Author Rayner doesn't distinguish clearly. Thus, what one would like to think of as virtue triumphing in the end, doesn't ring true. Rayner in his impish way may say, "Who cares?"

The reader does. Words have meanings. When they're used improperly, confusion and distrust reign. The author's latest girl friend in L.A. doesn't dance words. When Rayner avers that "Everyone lies when they first meet a girl," her reply seems apt.

"Richard, you're vain and stupid and a g------ pathological liar and I don't want anything more to do with you."

Nice summing up, that.

Rayner: boo.

Trapping the killer next door

POISON MIND
By Jeffrey Good
and Susan Goreck
Morrow
353 pages, $23

By DAN HERBECK
News Book Reviewer

To most of the world, George Trepal looked like a harmless computer nerd.

There he was, this quiet little guy with thick eyeglasses, who puttered around his Alturas, Fla., home in cutoff jeans, lived off his wife's salary and spent countless hours tinkering around on the Internet.

But there was more to Trepal — a lot more.

His IQ was so high that he belonged to the Mensa Society, the organization that says it lets only geniuses in. Trepal used his brain power on some unusual ventures, such as the study of sadism, torture and sex.

And lurking behind that quiet exterior was the heart of a killer.

In this true story, we learn how Trepal tried to poison the entire family living next door to him because they played their radios too loudly. We learn how he succeeded in killing one of them, a waitress named Peggy Carr, and how he almost got away with it.

Trepal, a neighbor's worst nightmare, is one of two central figures in this book. The other is Susan Goreck, a deputy in the Polk County Sheriff's Office who went undercover to nab Trepal.

Even if it wasn't a true story, this fast-moving tale of cat-and-mouse would make good reading. The fact that it really happened makes it all the more chilling.

Quite often, books are written and movies are made about undercover cops. Usually, we get exciting tales about the danger of undercover work, but find out almost nothing about how the cop was able to establish his or her undercover identity.

This book tells exactly how Goreck was able to pull it off. She was called into the case because other detectives were pretty much at a standstill in their investigation into Carr's 1988 murder.

Police had strong suspicions that Trepal did it, by putting a deadly chemical called thallium into a can of Coca-Cola at the Carr household. They found out that Trepal was a chemistry expert, that he had served time for running an illegal drug lab and that he had a bizarre hatred for people who played loud music.

They even knew that Trepal organized "Mensa Murder Weekends," where smart folks would get together to execute fake murder plots and see who could figure them out. But they couldn't prove a thing against Trepal.

Enter Goreck. Portraying herself as Sherry Guin, a lonely woman with a bad marriage, she got invited to one of the murder weekends. She befriended Trepal over a period of several months, and told him she was having troubles with her estranged husband.

Goreck never did get "smoking gun" evidence against Trepal. But she did get him on tape, making some incriminating statements about the killing. More importantly, her investigation led to the finding of some thallium in Trepal's home.

In the process, Goreck ran into problems of her own. She found that she could not go out in public with her husband and kids, for fear that she might run into Trepal somewhere. She also found herself deathly afraid that Trepal might figure her out, and poison her.

When Goreck, in her undercover role, asked Trepal why he had never told her about the murder of his next-door neighbor, he answered: "Oh yeah, somebody got poisoned. . . . I hope I'm not a prime suspect. That could be messy."

A jury convicted Trepal and he awaits execution on Florida's death row.

Stuck in pursuits of the flesh

THE NIGHT (ALONE)
By Richard Meltzer
Little, Brown
304 pages, $22.95

By ELMER PLOETZ
News Book Reviewer

Ah, whether to blame the message or the messenger. The dust jacket to Richard Meltzer's "The Night (Alone)" describes the book as "from the uncharted interior of the male spirit . . . perhaps the most uncensored exploration ever published of the forces — libidinal, alcoholic, creative, perverse — that drive most men's lives."

Don't believe it.

It's the cynical account of one man who would have you think there's no higher ideal than pursuing sex with whomever is available at the moment, no commitment greater than a quickie with a teenager while the girlfriend is at work.

Sure, sex is one prime motivation for humankind. But Meltzer — a ground-breaking rock writer when he wrote the 1970 book "The Aesthetics of Rock" — can't seem to get beyond pursuits of the flesh, at least until his character eventually gets so much he becomes bored by it. Meltzer seems to make a point of turning sex into something so cynical and dispassionate it will eventually bore the the reader as well. There's even an entry "I Never F---- My Sister."

Between the endless graphic descriptions (or are they confessions?), the writer finds time to play the cynic on a couple more fronts. He ridicules some acquaintance's guilt over not going to Vietnam while others died there:

"The *imperative* was for everybody to get out of it, see a $10 shrink, fake deafness, cut off a finger or just tell 'em you're a fag — whatever it takes — 'community' seem be damned. On a crass 'survival' level, you either want that extra yard to save your skin — *pre* having to napalm rice paddies to do it — or you didn't. There's a culpability, even in the docile accedance to pawnhood."

It's the assault-weapon attack of a former rock critic (before the music left him behind). It's also a vast oversimplification, and it doesn't really work here.

Meltzer seems to make a point of turning sex into something so cynical and dispassionate it will eventually bore the reader as well.

Meltzer takes his shots at kids and the people who give birth to them ("don't know 'bout you, but I for one would rather be chained to a flaming paper warehouse than be forced to endure, gratuitously, a unit sonic discharge of no-quit baby pain. Right. I don't own one, would never *wanna* own one.").

And by the end he gets crotchety. In his turning-40 essay, he chops on his contemporaries who are having children and proclaims, "I hope to hell I have not made no babies." He has dumped any nightlife and seems to have gotten beyond sex for sex's sake. ("Sex as hobby . . . is *possibly* as ludicrous as sex for procreation," he writes).

He wants to be left alone to read Abelard and listen to Bennie Moten, but he sounds nearly as antisocial and spent as the 70-year-old father he shows struggling early in the book.

So now back to the question of message and messenger: The character borders on morally corrupt, but is that Meltzer himself or just the character he has created?

"The Night (Alone)" is billed as a novel, but it's written in first person with the character's name changing to variation of Meltzer's (Rolf Metzger, Raoul Mueller, Rod McLizer). He makes reference to his book "The Aesthetics of Rock." He recalls the Hermes Record Co. Christmas Party in the early '70s in New York where the N.J. Gurls are the only act to show and which ends with the band ineffectually trying to lob snowballs across 57th Street at him.

It's an easy reference to Mercury Records and the New York Dolls.

So where does the reality end and the fiction begin? It's difficult to tell. Meltzer drops references to lots of fine jazz, and his encounter with more plebeian tastes when a woman asks him to recommend some Coltrane is one of the funnier moments, as it gives him a chance to take off on digital remastering.

Still, it's not nearly enough to redeem a book self-absorbed enough to open with the dedication "(TO ME, and I don't mean you)" or to come with the disclaimer "Nothing in this book is true (or good) (or beautiful)."

'A whirlwind of history'

James A. Baker III on the world stage

THE POLITICS OF DIPLOMACY: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-92
By James A. Baker III with Thomas M. DeFrank
Putnam Sons
687 pages, $32.50

By NORMAN ROWLINSON
News Book Reviewer

James A. Baker III

James A. Baker III was a key player in both the Reagan and Bush administrations, but his term as secretary of state, the period covered in this memoir, lasted only 3½ years. And yet during that brief span, as he told State Department staffers on his departure, 'we have run together through a whirlwind of history.' The world had been utterly changed as the Cold War ended — the Soviet Union and its satellite empire had disintegrated, Germany had been reunited, a war of aggression had been quelled in the Iraqi desert, and Arabs and Israelis had sat down together at a peace conference for the first time in history.

Baker reflects on his good fortune in occupying the office during such a time of revolutionary changes — changes for which he gives credit to the people who struggled against totalitarianism rather than to diplomats like himself. He was lucky, too, in his "unprecedented personal relationship" with President Bush, which enabled him to escape the interagency rivalry that had plagued secretaries of state in the Nixon, Carter and Reagan administrations.

Former Secretary of State George Shultz told him he had "the greatest job in the world" but that, because areas of responsibility were not well-defined, "everybody is out after your turf." During the Reagan administration, as chief of staff, Baker found the foreign policy apparatus "often a witches' brew of intrigue, elbows, egos and separate agendas." Reagan's staff often ignored his wishes and pursued their own policies, leading in the most sensational case to the Iran-contra scandal. Once William Clark, the national security adviser, was about to send his own envoy on a mission to Latin America without even notifying Shultz. Baker headed him off by informing Reagan.

As secretary, Baker said, "I was incredibly fortunate" in never having to worry about being undercut. An old friend of Bush, Baker had informal chats with the president at least twice a week, as well as easy access by phone.

As the Cold War faded, the Bush-Baker team had to perform a delicate balancing act, not only with Soviet leaders, but with conservative and liberal forces at home. Some conservatives didn't want to deal with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, at first doubting his sincerity and later doubting he would survive. At the same time, critics on the left felt the administration was not moving quickly enough, accusing it in September 1989 of "nostalgia for the Cold War."

At his first meeting with Gorbachev, Baker had mixed reactions, feeling that Gorbachev, while offering striking new initiatives, was making propaganda for Western audiences on disarmament issues. But he was soon reassured by his meetings with the Soviet foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, who became a trusted friend and partner. Baker's goal, which he coordinated with other Western leaders, was to arrange a "soft landing" to head off chaos as the old order disintegrated.

Preparing for his first visit to Moscow in May 1989, he was "wary of humiliating the Soviets as they retreated from their global empire because I didn't want to give hard-liners in Moscow the psychological basis for stalling." On the triumphant day when the Berlin Wall fell, the administration sought to to keep the Soviets from feeling, as President Bush put it, "that we were sticking our thumb in their eye." The most emotional moment for Baker came when the West German foreign minister called him as Berliners celebrated. Before the minister came on the line, his secretary blurted out to Baker: "God bless America. Thank you for everything, sir."

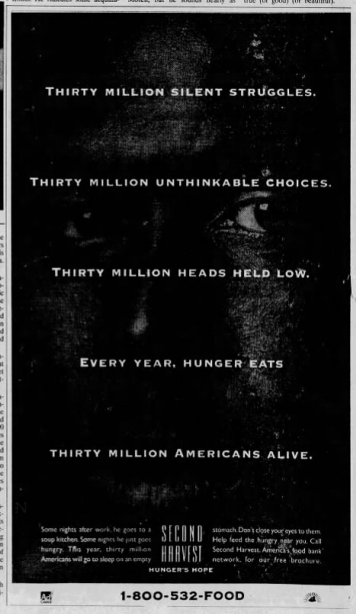
While Baker is sure history will be kind to Gorbachev for setting the reform process in motion, the Soviet leader's lack of understanding in the economic sphere was evident from his comment concerning the billions of dollars in economic aid that the Soviets received from Germany. "Things disappear around here," he said. "We got a lot of money for German unification, and when I called our people, I was told they didn't know where it was." An aide later told Baker, "It's just gone."

As Gorbachev was about to step down in December 1991, Shevardnadze mused soberly on what might have been. "We could have come out for a market economy," he told Baker. "Our mistake was not getting the stages and timing right."

Managing a Soviet "soft landing" was in the nature of holding the hand of a dying patient. In contrast, organizing the disparate coalition to fight the war against Iraq was like an amazingly complicated political campaign. Baker flew 700,000 miles to 90 nations during his brief term, and many of the miles were logged in lining up such unlikely partners as the Soviet Union, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and our Western allies in the crusade against Saddam Hussein. In addition, Israel had to be persuaded to stay out of the war despite murderous Scud missile attacks. It was like rounding up congressional votes as Baker cajoled, bargained and negotiated concerning national sensitivities and rival special interests.

As war neared, the administration faced a congressional furor in favor of "letting sanctions work." Baker dealt with two lingering controversies. He doubts that anything short of mowing sizable forces to the region would have prevented Saddam from invading Kuwait. And he rejects any idea that the coalition forces should have marched to Baghdad. Because of the nature of the coalition and the limited mandate from the United Nations, such a move was not even considered.

The book's title refers to Baker's belief that, both at home and abroad, politics and policy "are inextricably linked."



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